**Most Influential Visionary of the 19th Century**

*Should Usman Dan Fodio be considered the greatest visionary of the 19th Century?*

**January 20th 1900** As the Nineteenth Century comes to a close, it is only fitting that we look back on its glory. Important people emerge in every century, but the 1800’s generated an abundance of visionaries who all had one thing in mind, changing the world.

One example of an amazing visionary is Usman Dan Fodio, a man who managed to re-create the Islamic past in Northern and Western Africa. Fodio, 1754 – 1817 was born in the Hausa State of Gobrir, located in Western Africa. Fodio’s religious roots were passed down from his father, who assisted him in studying the Qur’an every day.

Fodio was part of the **Quadriyya Brotherhood,** a group of Sufis who were attempting, like many other Sufis at the time, to instill Islam on Western Africa. **Sufism,** what theQuadriyya Brotherhood followed, is the mystical type of Islam. Those who follow Sufism, or Sufis, feel that through meditation, prayer and enchantment, one can always become closer with God. Fodio was an orthodox Sufi, and felt passionately it was people’s obligation to become close to God.



Fodio was also a person of the **Fulani** heritage, an ethnicity, primarily found in Western Africa, but they also inhabited other areas in Africa as well. The Fulanis all shared the uniform objective of refurbishing Western Africa. The Fulanis and Fodio especially, felt that the only way to revamp Western Africa positively was through the worship of Islam.

Fodio felt so strongly about Islam that he supported a Jihad against any nonbelievers. He also felt that those who followed **Heathenism,** or the practice of idolatry were committing a sin. Fodio said that it was justified to fight because the people were “unbelievers and as such must be fought; and anyone helping an unbeliever was also an unbeliever” Fodio, a visionary, who was willing to fight, even had the people in his community carry around weapons. Fodio also felt that he had many parallels with Muhammad, and as an example, Fodio committed a **hijra** right before the actual fights began. The original hijra was the departure Muhammad made from Mecca to Medina to escape prosecution, the hijra was considered the start of the “Muslim Era.” Fodio’s hijra was from Dengel, to Gudu.

Like every visionary, Fodio had the astonishing ability to establish a unique relationship with most people. This was a key element in bringing back Islam to Africa. The peasants of the Hausa Dynasty were treated so poorly, that Fodio and his plans to take over the dynasty through religion, was their only and best hope. These poor people also had a colossal respect for Usman, who they called the Shayk, which meant one who has much wisdom. The peasants also believed that Fodio was the **Mandi**, which in the Islam religion, is a savior that was expected at that time. This illustrates how much respect Fodio acquired from the peasants, while also garnering the same respect from the rich. He particularly appealed to the clan leaders and cattle farmers because of his Fulani ethnicity. The old Hausa leaders, who also felt Islam should be reinforced aided his vision. The nobles that were urged to help paid for most of the expenses of the Jihad to come.

The tension between the Hausa state in Gobir and the Fulani people escalated, when Sultan Natafa in 1798 prohibited that anyone but Fodio preached Islam. Even when in 1802 Yunfa followed Natafa as sultan, the rule continued. The actual jihad began in 1804 after the Shayk took his final hijra as was talked about earlier. When the war began a new caliphate was formed for the Fulani people, the Sokoto Caliphate and, it was only appropriate that Fodio was picked the leader of this caliphate. The jihad was tough and despite many near collapses, the Sokoto Caliphate was able to prevail and eventually, in 1808 sack the capital of the Gobri Empire, Alkalawa. The Jihad would have definitely failed in not for the magnificent leadership Fodio showed. Throughout the Jihad, Fodio appointed the leaders, designed the caliphate, and created a just and well ran government, led by the central bureaucracy.

Fodio’s triumph created the largest empire that Africa has ever seen. A proficient political leader, a skilled military leader, set against the odds and defeating the Hausa State in Gobir with a minimal amount of money and supplies, more than anything else, Fodio was a remarkable cleric. A cleric who had a dream, and through diligence and passion, was able to achieve his goal of bringing back Islam to Western Africa. Fodio was a true visionary, but was he the best of the 19th Century?

- Blake Adler